

Inclusion and the standards agenda: a reflective commentary

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‘Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them’ (George Orwell, 1984).

In addition to its function as a vehicle for sharing interesting research and practice in the field of special and inclusive education, *Support for Learning* under the editorship of Philip Garner has never been afraid to address some of the more controversial issues of the day. A willingness to present a wide range of perspectives and interpretations of current debates has been a feature of the journal and an editor who seeks out strong opinions guarantees a lively publication. When Philip asked me to read the two articles in this edition written by Jonathan Glazzard and to express a view on their content I was keen to support this work. However, I was also anticipating a task somewhat easier to manage than that which emerged.

Glazzard provides the reader with interesting insights and perceptions of a primary school and more especially of the work and commitment of Bev, a special educational needs co-ordinator within the school. In both of the articles he rightly emphasises the professionalism and commitment of staff who have clearly, over many years, succeeded in addressing the diverse needs of a complex school population. In raising issues related to the challenges of meeting a standards agenda and raising the attainments of pupils who find difficulties with formal learning, Glazzard argues that current legislation and national education policy are inhibiting pupils from receiving the education best suited to their needs. He further suggests that for inclusion to work teaching needs to be ‘dissociated from functionalist models of education which emphasise education for the purpose of economic productivity’. This is an argument with which many teachers will sympathise in a climate where the relationship between education and productivity, with little value placed upon the individuality of the learner, seems to drive the current political agenda.

The extensive use of passages from interviews with Bev, while somewhat dystopic in nature, provide valuable insights into the feelings of a special educational needs co-ordinator which I feel sure would be echoed across the country. However, we need to exercise a little caution before we assume that the ‘price of being inclusive’ is the further isolation of pupils who have long been marginalised. It would be wrong to suggest that the raising of standards and inclusion are incompatible. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to support the view that schools that are ‘truly’ inclusive do much to improve the attainment and achievements of all learners. But just as Winston Smith in Orwell’s *1984* lived in a world of doublethink, so are we now living in a political environment where language has been hijacked in order to arrest the progress made by schools in addressing special educational needs over a number of years. A false focus upon raising standards which is founded only upon a narrow range of academic outcomes insults the intelligence of teachers who know that an educated individual can do more than pass examinations and regurgitate facts. It is sad that as a profession we have allowed ourselves to be hectored into a condition where we have seemingly submitted to notions of inclusion being focused upon the ability of learners to succeed in academic environments.

Bev provides interesting examples from a time earlier in her career when she felt confident in her own abilities to address the needs of a wide range of pupils. She illustrates her professionalism and the thought that went into planning for both individuals and classes of pupils. The fact that she no

longer has this confidence is not as a result of her decline as a teacher, but more clearly relates to the blinkered interpretation of education made by reactionary politicians. I only hope that Bev recognises this and does not resign herself to a climate of educational despair. In her description of enabling a pupil to demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning where he had previously struggled, along with his new-found curiosity about his surroundings and his ability to solve problems, Bev provides a picture of what professionalism in education has always been about.

Glazzard has provided readers with necessary food for thought in these two articles. Yet I would urge that the progress that has been made towards a more just and equitable society through the inclusion agenda is not lost through our inability to regain possession of the language and thought behind the movement for inclusion. Doublethink has been used by those in power to alter the ways in which we see the world on many occasions – inclusion and raising standards are of course, incompatible if we choose to adopt the interpretation of these terms made by politicians. The alternative is to ensure that our own elucidation of these terms is at the forefront of discussions to support a commitment that enables each pupil to learn while recognising their individuality and their right to take their place in a more just society